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Australia bound: convict voyaging, 1788-1868

Between 1788 and 1868, around 914 ships left Britain and Ireland with approximately 163,000 convicts bound for New South Wales, Van Diemen's Land and Western Australia. Despite Charles Bateson's recognition that the 'history of the conveyance of those prisoners is absorbingly interesting, full of the rich drama of human suffering and human endeavour', strikingly little scholarly attention has been paid either to the organisation of the ships prior to departure or to convict and other experiences on the voyages themselves.¹ Indeed, half a century after it was first published, Bateson's work remains the sole scholarly monograph on the subject.² This lacuna stands in sharp contrast not only with the increasingly substantial literature on the experiences of transported convicts after their disembarkation in the colonies but also with the thriving secondary literature on the voyages of other contemporaneous groups including free emigrants and slaves.³ This research project seeks to begin to fill this gap: its aim is to write an experiential history of the convict ship.

Writing of transportation to South & Southeast Asia in this period, Clare Anderson comments that Indian convict ships were, in some senses, 'empty archival spaces'.⁴ By contrast, the Australian convict ships were sites of unusually intense archival production: there were more texts than ships and a surprisingly large proportion of these survive. Many were the product of government order: throughout much of the period, for instance, both the masters and surgeon-superintendents of convict ships were required to submit copies in duplicate of their log-books and journals. Others were the products of free voyagers on convict ships, including the journals, diaries and letters of passengers and crew. Nor were convicts simply the subjects of such shipboard texts for they also produced their own accounts in the form of personal letters, songs, drawings, diaries and ship 'newspapers'.⁵

This project seeks to interrogate these texts in order to write an experiential history of the voyages, focusing on processes of personal transformation and change, particularly among the convicts. Although convict experiences were inevitably varied – both between individuals and across time – an initial reading of the evidence suggests that many experienced transportation as a point of profound rupture; a sudden, forced unmaking of the self. 'I seem to

¹ Charles Bateson, *The Convict Ships* (1959), 3.

² Some studies of individual ships have been published. See, for example: Michael Flynn, *The Second Fleet: Britain's grim convict armada of 1790* (2001) & Babette Smith, *A cargo of women* (1992).

³ A number of articles have been published on specific aspects of the voyages, such as health. Female convict voyages have also received some scrutiny. See, for example: I. Brand & M. Staniforth, 'Care and control: female convict transportation voyages to Van Diemen's Land, 1818-53', *The Great Circle*, 13:2, 1991, 23-42 & Joy Damousi, 'Chaos and order: gender, space and sexuality on female convict ships', *Australian Historical Studies* 104, 1995, 351-72.

⁴ Clare Anderson, 'The Feringees are flying – the ship is ours! The convict middle passage in colonial South and Southeast Asia, 1790-1860', *Indian Economic Social History Review*, 42, 2005, 143.

⁵ Other types of artefact can also be added to this list including love tokens, tattoos, and, in the case of the ship *Rajah*, an embroidered quilt dedicated to Elizabeth Fry. See: <http://nga.gov.au/RajahQuilt/> Shipboard 'newspapers' featured a range of written materials, including news articles, essays reflecting on the writer's convict condition, poems and other creative pieces. See, for example, 'The Pestonjee Bomanjee Journal', in Daniel Ritchie (ed.), *The voice of our exiles: stray leaves from a convict ship* (1854).

think, yet barely think I do', one convict man confessed on the eve of departure; 'Am well in body, bewildered in mind'.⁶ Other evidence speaks similarly to feelings of profound disorientation and even devastation: thus, for example, despite the intense stigma attached to the act in this period, suicide, and the contemplation of suicide, was not uncommon.⁷ Suffering, however, was only ever one part of the story: survival, negotiation and transformation were equally important experiences and the sheer scale and variety of the archives promises many rich and diverse insights into these aspects of the voyages too. Newspaper and journal descriptions of ship departures, for instance, will enable an exploration of familial leave-taking rituals and ceremonies. Official lists of cargo belonging to convicts provide information, in addition, both on the gift-giving practices that surrounded these departure ceremonies and on the kinds of goods to which convicts were materially and symbolically attached. Along with other sources including personal letters and petitions for family reunion (the majority written by wives of transported men seeking passage on convict ships), the research promises to throw significant new light on the intimate relationships of ordinary working-class people in these decades as well as upon the ways in which convict familial relations and friendship networks were re-worked by transportation. The construction of new relationships, friendships and communities aboard ship will be examined, as too will the reshaping of old identities and the forging of new ones through a wide range of social and cultural activities including shipboard singing and story-telling, crossing-the-line ceremonies, religious practices and expressions. The acquisition of new literacy skills - and particularly the impact of these upon self-identity and modes of self-expression - through the schools that were established on many convict ships from the 1830s onwards, will be considered. Finally, shipboard gender and class dynamics will be explored, with special consideration given to the social and cultural relations between convicts and a number of prominent surgeon-superintendents, some of whom had close links with philanthropic networks in Britain and empire and, in particular with the work of prison reformers like Elizabeth Fry.⁸

Proposed timetable:

Although this project builds on my previous work on convict transportation, it is itself a substantively new research project. Given this, and the scale and diversity of the surviving archives, I envisage *Australia bound* being a two-year project,

⁶ James Grove, letters from Warwick Gaol & HMS *Captivity*, Portsmouth, in Benjamin Bensley (ed.), *Lost and found; or light in the prison. A narrative with original letters of a convict condemned for forgery* (London, 1859), 48 & 100.

⁷ See the report on John Stanton's suicide in Millbank Prison which concluded that the only 'probable motive for the act' was Stanton's 'fear of immediate transportation', *BPP*, XXIV [1524], 1852, 136, 139.

⁸ A number of individual surgeon-superintendents travelled on successive convict voyages and, while some did so for financial reasons, others were (also) inspired by religious and moral motives. They included men like Thomas Reid and Colin Arrott Browning. Browning, for example, was surgeon-superintendent on eight convict ships between 1831 and 1849. He published several important accounts of these voyages, including *England's Exiles* (London, 1842). Reid had particularly close links with Elizabeth Fry and undertook the job of surgeon-superintendent on two convict ships in the early 1820s largely at her urging. His published account of that experience, *Two Voyages to New South Wales and Van Diemen's Land* (London, 1822), was dedicated to Fry and her Ladies' Committee. Fry's interest in the conditions of prisoners prompted her to establish a regular programme of convict ship visiting and to encourage the creation of Ladies' Committees in the Australian colonies and Britain.

beginning in October 2009 and ending in September 2011. The first year will be spent in the collection and careful reading of the archives and the writing of several articles. The second year will be devoted to writing a complete draft of a book and to the preparation of an online resource and exhibition.

Archival & other source materials:

The sources are to be found in archives across Britain and Australia. The bulk of the Australian materials will be collected during a research trip in summer 2009. (I have separate funds available to pay for this trip.) In Britain, the National Archives (Kew) holds a substantial body of official materials on the convict ships, including the journals of masters and surgeon-superintendents and several thousand petitions for family reunion.⁹ The National Maritime Museum (Greenwich) has one of the more significant non-government collections (in both Britain and Australia), including the shipboard diary of convict William Maybury transported on the *Bussorah Merchant* in 1828.¹⁰ The NMM's collections are notably diverse, including the accounts of, for instance, a convict, a carpenter, a purser, and a surgeon. Small collections are held elsewhere, including in Dublin, Edinburgh and Liverpool.

Planned outcomes:

(i) Guide to manuscripts: One of the aims of this project is to create a base for future research by producing a detailed, descriptive guide to manuscript and contemporaneously published sources on the Australian convict ships held in libraries, museums and archives around the world. I envisage making this freely available as a PDF file, via either the NMM's site or my own homepage at the University of Bristol.

(ii) A book: provisionally entitled *Australia Bound: convict voyaging, 1788-1868*. I intend to have a contract for this by early summer 2009 and, should this application be successful, to write a complete first draft of the book by the end of the fellowship in 2011. I will also submit a number of articles to refereed journals.

(iii) Online exhibition and resource: I am keen to seek a broader 'public' both for this project and for my other research work. I have worked in the past with a number of museums and adult and public education programmes in Australia and I am currently discussing the possibility of an online exhibition (including interpretative essays) of personal letters to and from convicts and their families with the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery. I hope this will also include collaboration with the National Library of Australia. I would like to develop a similar online resource & exhibition on the convict ships with the NMM (perhaps in collaboration with the National Maritime Museum in Sydney) and would welcome the chance to discuss and develop this idea with your curators.

(v) Conference and seminar papers: I will give a number of papers based on the project at academic seminars and conferences in Britain and internationally.

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⁹ See: ADM 52 Captains' Logs, ADM 53 Ships' Logs & ADM 101 & MT 32 Surgeon-Superintendent Journals.

¹⁰ See: MSS/87/047.